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Retirement Pensions and Morale in Public Service

By FRANCIS FISHER KANE

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IT is coming to be said more and more that the public is a silent partner in all industry. It is also said that the relationship of employer and employee ought at least to have the aspect of a partnership—that the true interests of employer and employee are so much the same that they may be regarded as partners without too great a stretch of the imagination. I am now going to consider for a moment a business in which we are a partner in a very real sense. I refer to the business of the government.

PUBLIC SERVICE CONDITIONS

The business conducted by our government is perhaps the largest business on the face of this earth, and in many respects it is conducted very badly. I agree that the *esprit de corps* in the service is better than is commonly supposed. I know of many offices where there is a splendid devotion to the public weal, and I know personally hundreds of employees in the service of the government who serve it with devotion and public spirit—men and women who are proud to work for the United States, even though there is drudgery in what they do, and even though the conditions of their labor are far from satisfactory. There are many men and women at present serving the Department of Justice in minor positions, as well as in positions of importance, who toil on from day to day for the mere love of the service, although their salaries are such as a private corporation would be ashamed to pay. Nevertheless, the work of the government suffers as a whole.

It used to be said that the one vice inherent in republics was the overpayment of subordinates and the underpayment of persons at the top. The scrub woman, or the janitor, received more, and the man in a position of responsibility received less, than they would have received had they been working for a private employer. Hours of labor were short, but there was always a chance of the individual losing the position, if the job was a "political one," and therefore service of the public suffered from an inferior class of labor at the bottom. The right sort of men were not tempted to enter the service, either at the bottom or the top. A change has now taken place, but it is not for the better. The men at the top are still paid insufficient salaries, and now the pay of those holding subordinate positions is also insufficient. Places that were overpaid are now not paid enough. Salaries have not kept pace with the cost of living.

The salaries in the Post Office Department are a crying shame. Often the right sort of men cannot be secured as postmen, let alone as special delivery employees. Two days ago I heard that the postmaster of Camden had taken on five ex-soldiers as postmen. They all resigned within three days. The conditions of labor, combined with the low pay, drove them out of the service, almost as soon as they entered it, and I could tell you case after case of splendid fellows in the Department of Justice who have had to leave the federal service because the pay offered

them was insufficient to support their families.

Until recently the head of the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice could not himself get more than \$4,000 per annum under the law. The Bureau of Investigation is the field force, the detective force, of the Department of Justice, and the responsibilities of its chief are very great. Of course he must be a man of high character. He must maintain the standards of the department and see that the agents under him, who are scattered all over the country, do not fall into the unfair, and often dishonest, practices that we have come to associate with private detective agencies. He must also be a trained investigator; he must know how crimes are detected and criminals are punished; he must be able to handle what has become one of the most important bureaus of the government, with offices in all of our large cities, and hundreds, if not thousands, of men working under local chiefs and sending daily their reports to Washington. To pay such a man—a man fitted to be the chief of this bureau—a beggarly \$4,000 per year is pitiful. Of course the government cannot obtain, for so small a sum, the kind of talent and experience that is needed. What I have said as to the chief of this bureau applies to many other similar positions, to local superintendents and a large proportion of agents who are working faithfully, in season and out of season, for the government.

CLASSIFIED SERVICE CONDITIONS

It is a shame that several branches of the public service that have been recently created are not within the classified service. It is a shame that the Census operatives, and many of those working for the Treasury Department—I might especially mention

the Prohibition Enforcement Bureau—are not within the classified service, and that the agents in these bureaus must to so large an extent hold their positions through politics. This ought to be remedied. On the other hand, the Civil Service Commission does not seem to be exercising its functions in the most intelligent manner, and we still hear of “fool examinations” which stand for nothing, and naturally enough bring the system of competitive examinations into ill repute. I do not know whether additional legislation is necessary. Probably it is only necessary that the Civil Service Commission should get a better grip on things and bring their methods up to date.

LEGISLATION FOR EXISTING EVILS IN LABOR CONDITIONS

The National Federation of Federal Employees, with which I am associated, is a splendid trade union in which I should like to see all our federal employees eventually enrolled. We are of course pledged not to go on strike—that would be tantamount to treason. When abuses exist, as they do at present, we can only carry our complaints to the public, and have them remedied through Congress. Therefore, we now back the Nolan-Johnson bill which provides for a minimum wage of \$3 a day—\$1,080 per annum—for federal employees, and which further provides for an intelligent system of promotion, and for other conditions making for fair remuneration and greater efficiency in the service. The other bill behind which we stand is the Sterling-Lehlbach bill, which provides for the retirement at a proper age of federal employees. The present Sterling-Lehlbach bill applies to all departments of the government. At present there are superannuated employees in many of the offices in Washington. Men and women who have grown old in the service and

are no longer useful, are nevertheless retained in their positions because their superiors have not the heart to discharge them. This is a real evil

and calls for correction. Let me, therefore, in closing urge the securing of the passage of these much needed bills.